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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: social integration

Statement submitted by Baha'i International Community, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Reclaiming freedom of conscience, religion or belief to promote social integration

1. At a time when religious oppression, fanaticism and clashes between differing systems of belief are straining modes of governance, frameworks of development, security, and human rights — we are pleased that the Commission for Social Development has focused on the theme of social integration. This theme, so central to the challenges at every level of society, has been described as the capacity of people to live together with dignity and respect, as well as a process of fostering stable and just societies, in which individuals and communities are free to shape their present and their future. While much attention has been focused on eliminating the socio-economic barriers to social integration, the full achievement of this goal will require countries to also address issues outside of traditional notions of exclusion and disadvantage. To the extent that efforts towards social integration will reflect the diverse voices and aspirations of the world's people, governments will need to tackle one of the most challenging and neglected issues of our time — ensuring every individual's freedom of conscience, religion or belief.

2. The human being is not only an economic and social creature, but also a noble one with a free will and a conscience that makes possible the search for meaning and for truth. Without the freedom to pursue this fundamentally human quest, neither dignity nor justice is possible. The nations of the world have repeatedly committed to upholding an individual's right to freely adopt and change his religion or beliefs, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Yet, approximately half of the world's population still lives under laws, which restrict the right to freely adopt and change one's religion or beliefs.[1] Moreover, restrictions of religious freedom have been linked to diminished well-being in the general population, increased social conflict, poor socio-economic outcomes and political instability.[2]

3. Over the years, the United Nations has increasingly acknowledged the important links between religion, freedom, and human development. The 1995 World Summit for Social Development noted that "societies must respond more effectively to the material and spiritual needs of individuals" and that intolerance and religious hatred pose "severe threats" to human security and well-being.[3] In 2004, the United Nations Human Development Report, for the first time, acknowledged cultural liberty as a vital part of human development and affirmed the "profound importance of religion to people's identities."[4] In an equally significant contribution, the 2004 Arab Human Development Report identified freedom as both the "guarantor and the goal" of human development and

[1] Boyle, K., & Sheen, J. (1997). *Freedom of Religion and Belief: World Report.* London: Routledge.

[2] Marshall, P. A. (Ed.). (2008). *Religious Freedom in the World.* Plymouth, United Kingdom: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

[3] United Nations World Summit for Social Development. (1995). *Report of the World Summit for Social Development.* [URL: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/wssd/agreements.html].

[4] UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). (2004). *Human Development Report 2004: Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World.* New York: Oxford University Press.

the primary requisite for development in the Arab region.[5] Indeed, there are no grounds for thinking that freedom of conscience, religion or belief is a Western value or concern. Nor should this freedom be seen as a luxury to be pursued only after basic needs for food and shelter have been met. Rather, it is central to efforts to restore human dignity and strengthen community life.

4. A number of developments on the world stage highlight the need for the Commission's attention to this issue. First, a rapidly increasing movement of people and ideas is straining efforts to create peaceful and cohesive communities, particularly in countries that seek to impose homogeneity of practice or belief. Religious oppression continues to undermine social and political stability. Second, in virtually all parts of the world, religion has become a subject of major political and social importance. As compared with legal norms, it is religious and cultural norms that have proven to be the more powerful determinants of attitudes and behaviors — frustrating many governments while bolstering others.

5. Third, the concept of the "defamation of religions," which has distorted the international human rights framework and challenged human rights machinery, has selectively restricted the space for peaceful public exploration and debate of belief-related issues, so desperately needed in diverse and divided communities. Furthermore, the related issue of religious extremism, as a major obstacle to social integration and stability, has yet to be acknowledged by the United Nations. Fourth, the current debate about religion in the public sphere has largely been driven by proponents of extremes — those who impose their religious ideology by force and those who deny any place for expressions of faith or belief in the public sphere. Yet neither extreme represents the views of the majority of humankind.

6. The freedom of conscience, religion or belief may well be the next frontier in the march towards social integration. With every successive moral battle — whether focused on slavery, apartheid, racism, discrimination against women, or nationalism — humanity has broken down barriers to social integration and raised yet another pillar of a more just global community. The Bahá'í International Community would like to take this opportunity to highlight possible lines of action that could be pursued by the Commission, by governments, and by civil society to further the protection of the freedom of conscience, religion or belief to promote social integration.

7. Any long-term strategy to foster an understanding of this freedom must be rooted in efforts to promote literacy and education: women, men and children who can read their own scriptures and those of other religions or beliefs, who are free to question and discuss, and who are able to participate in the generation and application of knowledge will be better prepared to counter the forces of ignorance and fanaticism. The Toledo Guiding Principles

[5] UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, & Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organizations. (2005). *Arab Human Development Report 2004: Towards Freedom in the Arab World.* New York: United Nations Publications.

on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools,[6] an initiative of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, provides a recent example of an effort to promote a better understanding of the role that religions play in today's pluralistic world. While such an understanding alone will not lead to greater respect, no doubt an absence of such understanding underpins much conflict and stereotyping. The Guiding Principles do not advocate any one curriculum but, rather, offer guidance on designing and implementing curricula which are fair and balanced in their treatment of religions and beliefs.

8. Another concrete effort comes from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, where the government, in response to a recent report from its Commission on Integration and Cohesion, has launched a plan to tackle community tensions. It includes a consultative process to develop a strategy for fostering meaningful interactions between people from different faith communities, and between faith communities and wider civil society.[7] These are but two examples among a growing body of initiatives springing up in communities and nations around the world. A spirit of experimentation can be discerned as communities and institutions engage in bridge-building initiatives, driven by a desire to know, to understand, and to connect. As such efforts gain in capacity, impact and prominence, they will contribute to the dynamic learning process that drives efforts towards social integration.

9. We offer the following recommendations as possible next steps for advancing the freedom of conscience, religion or belief to promote social integration:

    - The Commission for Social Development should acknowledge the role of freedom of conscience, religion or belief in social development and in the establishment of cohesive and just societies.
    - The United Nations and relevant stakeholders should initiate research into the connection between freedom of conscience, religion or belief and various dimensions of social development including, but not limited to: gender equality, poverty, education, knowledge production and socio-economic structures.
    - Governments could call for a Secretary-General's report on the aforementioned issue. Among other things, the report could examine the impact of limitations of this freedom on particularly vulnerable groups (e.g. women, children, refugees, minorities and migrant workers) to better understand how this creates further barriers to their social integration.

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[6] The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODHIR). (2007). *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religion and Beliefs in Public Schools.* Warsaw, Poland: OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

[7] Department for Communities and Local Government. (2008). *Face to Face and Side by Side: A Framework for Partnership in our Multi Faith Society.* London, United Kingdom.

- In collaboration with civil society, governments should develop a strategy to facilitate local and/or regional consultations on this theme so as to raise consciousness about this freedom and to inform government policy.
- Government should develop guidelines for teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools.
- The Commission could request that the Human Rights Committee issue a new comment related to the freedom of conscience, religion or belief (as provided for in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). Given the many questions related to this freedom that have arisen since the Committee's first comment on this right in 1993[8] (e.g. the defamation of religions, minority rights), it would be helpful to have further legal clarity on this right.

10. The individual's freedom of conscience, religion and belief is at the core of human development and efforts to create a just and harmonious society. The collective task of moving towards increasing levels of integration and cohesion is unthinkable if a significant portion of the world's population is not free to partake in the exploration and debate at the promptings of their intellect and conscience.

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[8] *Human Rights Committee, General Comment 22.* Article 18. (1994). U.N. Doc. HRIGEN1Rev.1 at 35.